BRIEFER COMMUNICATIONS.

A NATIONAL DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH.

The prosperity of a State rests fundamentally upon the material and moral welfare of its people. Governments exist for, and should use their vast powers for the betterment of, the people. Aside, therefore, from its essential governing powers, it is the peculiar province of a government, especially of a national government, to exercise a supervisory, investigating and, as it were, pedagogic attitude toward the material welfare of its people. Under this head are embraced those administrative functions that are of an investigating statistical nature, that consist not in the exercise of any new powers, nor in the interference with or control of any of the social activities of the people, but solely in the study of conditions and of methods, and the diffusion of the information thus obtained. Since the late war the extension of federal activities in this field has been marked. The Departments of Agriculture and of Labor have been established and numerous bureaus organized, the sole function of which has been the collection and diffusion among the people of sound information regarding the particular subjects with which they are concerned. Taking all the branches of the federal service together it will be found that there are now no less than seventeen distinct divisions engaged almost exclusively in the prosecution of scientific work, the results of which are given to the people in bulletins and annual reports.

This much the government is doing for the spread of knowledge regarding the material interests of the people, but as yet, excepting the decennial censuses, there is no agency provided for the collection and diffusion of proper information regarding the public health. In this respect the United States Government stands unique among the civilized nations of the world. For several years we have had a bureau in the Department of Agriculture for the study of the health of animals, and, guided by the information thus obtained, Congress has been able to exercise a legislative control that has resulted in the total eradication from our country of certain diseases afflicting live stock, notably contagious pleuro-pneumonia, formerly widely-prevalent and fatal. Regarding the health of the people, however, our law-makers have not yet seen the necessity of the exercise of the pedagogic powers of the government. It seems almost absurd that this should be the case.

"Nothing pays better than good book-keeping in national affairs," says Dr. John S. Billings, "and in no part of the nation's work is

good book-keeping more useful than in keeping records of the life and health of its people." True at the time it was uttered, this remark becomes more forcible every day. During the last few years so rapid has been the progress in the science of the prevention and cure of disease that this branch of human knowledge has fairly earned the name of "The New Science of Medicine." That which especially characterizes this new science is the success with which the causes of diseases have been investigated and efficacious prophylactic measures devised. It is now known that a very considerable number of our most widely prevalent and fatal diseases are due to the presence in the atmosphere and drinking water of minute organisms or germs, as they are called. Careful study has shown the nature of these microbes and the conditions favorable and unfavorable to their generation and increase, and where, through public agencies, the benefits of these discoveries have been obtained for the people at large, beneficial results of a striking nature have been obtained.

Should there be established a new Department of Health, or a rehabilitation of the old board, its functions should be of an educational rather than a coërcive character. Its usefulness would lie in the promotion of higher scientific research, the collection of statistical information, and the diffusion of the information thus obtained among the people of the various States. The investigation of local causes of disease and specific methods of prevention, and the collection of statistics of a purely local character, should be duties falling within the provinces of state and municipal boards. The wise rule of J. S. Mill, "that power should be localized and knowledge centralized," should be followed as far as possible.

There has been introduced in the last session of Congress, by Mr. Sherman, a bill for the establishment of a Department of Public Health which provides for the performance of the following duties: To obtain, through all sources accessible, including State and municipal authorities throughout the United States, weekly reports of the sanitary condition of ports and places within the United States. Further, as far as it may be able, to procure and tabulate statistics relating to marriages, births, deaths, the existence of epidemic, endemic and other diseases, especially those of a degenerative character, such as malignant growths and affections of the circulatory, respiratory, secretory and reproductive organs, and data concerning the fruit of consanguineous marriage and transmissibility of insane, alcoholic, syphilitic, nervous and malignant types of constitution. Further, to procure information relating to climatic and other conditions affecting public health, especially in reference to the most favorable regions in the United States for the cure or relief of the chronic

diseases of the several organs of the body, especially of consumption. Further, to obtain information, from a sanitary point of view, of the health and comfort of the laboring classes, and to make investigation, both in the United States and, if necessary, in foreign countries, into the nature, origin and prevention of contagious and epidemic diseases, as well as into the causes and conditions of particular outbreaks of disease in the United States, and to publish and distribute documents relating to the prevention of disease. Finally, that this department is to co-operate with State boards of health, the signal service, the medical departments of the army, navy and marine service, and to unify and utilize their work so as to make the department of health a repository of the most important sanitary facts that concern the public comfort.

This enumeration of duties by this bill hardly indicates sufficiently what should be the entire nature of the functions of a department of public health. Broadly speaking its duties should be of a threefold character.

First. It should be one of its essential duties to inform State and municipal authorities regarding recent discoveries relating to the preservation of the public health. The encouragement of higher institutions affording facilities for advanced independent and original scientific research cannot be too strongly commended, but at the same time it should be remembered that probably not one one-hundredth part of the facts that the study of science has already yielded, are to-day accessible to more than a very small fraction of the people. But knowledge is useless unless it is made accessible to those who are to be benefited by it. The work of this department in this direction should be, then, to enable society to utilize for its own good the progress in curative and preventive medicine. For the performance of this work the department would not need to make difficult and expensive investigations. There would be required only a small corps of competent specialists, who, keeping themselves fully informed as to the latest results obtained in their departments of knowledge, could cull from them and publish in their annual reports or bulletins the points most important for the people of the United States to know. Thus would be furnished to legislators the data upon which to enact necessary and wise laws, and to State and municipal boards the information upon which to base intelligent action.

A second duty of a national department of public health should be the collection of information regarding the cause, prevalence and cure of particular diseases, especially those of a widely prevalent and contagious character. Under this head would be included all

zymotic diseases, consumption, syphilis, leprosy, la grippe, cholera and others.

The third province of this department should embrace investigations into the rates of mortality, and the distribution of diseases as regards locality, sex, nationality, age, occupations, and conditions of life of the sufferers. Such investigations, if carefully made, would throw much light upon several problems that are at present greatly troubling the public mind. The influence of the influx of foreigners upon our shores as regards the introduction and spread of diseases, and upon the rates of child-births, deaths, and size of families, would be shown. Included in these investigations would be the ascertainment of the comparative healthfulness of different occupations, the results of which would have a direct bearing upon the questions of shorter hours, of the prohibition of the employment of women and children in factories and mines, of the necessity for the introduction of sanitary and life-saving appliances, and possibly upon the question of compulsory insurance in particular trades. Much pertinent information regarding the proper housing of the poorer working classes would also be obtained. Comparative statistics would show the bearing of home conditions, cleanliness, and density of population, upon the health of the laboring people. Finally, sanitary statistics, properly collected, and upon a sufficiently large scale to allow of the comparison of averages, might have a bearing upon the temperance question. Take for instance the fact disclosed by the reports of the Registrar-General of England that since grocers have received the privilege of selling liquors, their rate of mortality has risen. The presumption of course is that constant temptation has made them greater drinkers, which has resulted in a greater death rate. If the method of differences has been correctly followed in this comparison, this fact certainly affords the temperance party an additional proof of the deleterious effects of excessive consumption of strong spirits.

These then are the three general services to be rendered by a national department of health. But, besides these, there are two other distinct benefits to be derived from its establishment. First, state and municipal boards would receive from it a salutary influence. By means of the introduction of the latest methods of investigation, and the use of improved and uniform tabulations of statistics, their several efforts would be co-ordinated, and more accurate and general results obtained. Also, in some cases, State authorities might receive certain assistance in their work, just as States, upon the payment of suitable remuneration, now avail themselves of the skill of the United States geodetic and coast surveyors. Secondly, the existence of a national department of health would provide a corps of scientific and

trained officials for the collection of sanitary statistics for the decennial censuses. The desirability of maintaining constantly in its employ a body of men skilled in statistical matters, who may assist in the preparation of the census, is sufficiently obvious. As it now stands, each superintendent of the census has to depend upon a new set of men, entirely unskilled, and who are dismissed just as they are becoming sufficiently trained to render their services valuable. Statistics that are improperly collected and arranged are worse than useless, and the money spent in their compilation worse than thrown away.

The length of this paper does not permit, nor is this the place to give extended proofs of the expensiveness of disease, and the economy of introducing, even at great expense, the smallest of sanitary improvements. This is a fact that does not need demonstration. Take the single fact disclosed by a parliamentary commission, that over seven thousand of the present cases of blindness in the United Kingdom, have been caused by the neglect of the inflammation of the eyes of the new born, the cure for which is extremely simple. How much personal suffering, and public expense too, for the majority of the blind are dependent upon the public for their support, might have been saved had there been a wide diffusion of the means by which this evil could have been prevented.

Why then, is it that we are still without a national department of health? It is not because its activities would be of a socialistic nature, nor does it seem possible that the expense can be the objection, for even did we not possess abundant national resources, the false economy of the present condition is plain; nor, finally, does its establishment involve political issues. The difficulty seems to lie in a lack of the spirit of public duty and energy. The well-to-do control politics, and it is the well-to-do who are the ones least suffering from unsanitary conditions. It is the poor who would receive the greatest benefit from an intelligent and efficient administration of the sanitary laws, and it is the poor who are the most ignorant of this, and who possess the least political influence. If by any means the general government can assist in the betterment of the laboring population, without at the same time opening the door for the introduction of greater socialistic evils, it should be done. A national department of health, affords one such means. Says Sir John Simon, who has spent his lifetime in the promotion of sanitary progress in England: "It cannot be too loudly proclaimed that an efficient administration of the sanitary laws is among the best helps which can be given to the poorer classes of the population, and that authorities who negligently or corruptly fail of their duties in such administration are among the worst oppressors of the poor." The true progress of the nations must henceforth be

measured by the moral and material elevation of their working classes, and for the promotion of this end, the enactment of proper sanitary laws, and their efficient administration, can play no small part.

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A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL SAVINGS BANK.

In connection with the comprehensive paper on "School Savings Banks," in the ANNALS for July, 1892, it may be of interest to present a short account of some novel features found in the very successful bank operated by the public schools of Bloomington, Ind.

This bank was put into operation September 28, 1891, upon the general plan outlined in the above mentioned paper, with, however, a few slight deviations that render necessary a special system of books. Some of these have been copyrighted by the manager, Mr. C. M. Carpenter. Money is received on Mondays, both morning and afternoon. The pupil fills out a deposit check, which is filed by the teacher. The amount is credited upon the pupil's pass-book, which he retains, and also upon the teacher's ledger. The teacher then seals all the money in an envelope, with a statement of the amount on the outside. The manager goes to the various teachers and collects the envelopes, giving a receipt for the amount of each. He then takes the envelopes to the secretary of the Workmen's Building Loan-Fund and Savings Association, who counts the money in the manager's presence and places it among the funds of the association. If any pupil wishes to withdraw any of his money he writes a check for the amount, signed by his parent and by the teacher, who places it in the envelope with the deposits. When the secretary of the association finds these drafts he hands them to the manager, who countersigns them. The secretary pays the amount out of the deposits just received, placing the money for each teacher in a separate envelope. These envelopes the manager carries back, receiving from each teacher a receipt. Thus he does not touch the money at any point, the only possibility of fraud being his failure to give the secretary a receipt for money returned on drafts. This will be rectified.

The especially novel feature of this plan is the fact that the money is deposited with a building association, rather than a savings bank. Such a disposition of the funds was a necessity at the outset, there being no savings bank in Bloomington. But, as it turns out, it is the most fitting and feasible plan possible; fitting, because the two institutions are so similar in their nature and aims, and feasible because it helps the association, and at the same time compels the pupil to deal only with the teacher, thus retaining the bank as a constituent part